

It is a land that consumes its inhabitants and all the people that we saw in it were men of great stature. (13:32)

It is a land that exhausts its inhabitants. It is a land not designed for people of ordinary size. Unless one has the constitution of a giant, he will become moribund there. Small and weak people do not survive there. Veritably, the *meraglim* encountered funerals wherever they went. Their error was a lack of faith in Hashem. They never asked themselves: Could Hashem be doing this for a reason? He was. The people were too preoccupied with visiting the cemeteries to notice a team of Jews wandering through the countryside. The report the spies brought back was based upon their superficial, cursory glimpse of *Eretz Yisrael*. Had they done an in-depth analysis of the land, instead of giving it a random glance, they would have seen things differently. The *Baalei Mussar* refer to their error as a lack of *hisbonenus*, reflection, on their part. They should have asked themselves: Why would Hashem send us to such a miserable land, where people are dying and which is fit only for giants? These were highly intelligent men, who had witnessed Hashem's awesome powers first-hand. Would He realistically have liberated them from Egypt to have them die in the land of their destination? For whatever reason they refused to think, and, as a result, we are still paying for their unfavorable report.

The *Chafetz Chaim* comments that this is most often the case concerning slanderers who use *lashon hora* as a weapon to destroy a person. They observe someone acting in a manner which they deem unbecoming, or they see him entering into – or being part of – a questionable environment. As a result, they immediately rule that he needs to be ostracized. Had they just had a semblance of decency and given him the benefit of the doubt, they would have realized that they were reading the entire scene completely wrong.

Horav Sholom Bentzion Felman, zl, relates a story which is regrettably common (not the story, but our making a judgment call based upon seeing without reflecting). A *kollel* fellow who spent his days and nights engrossed in Torah study was finding it increasingly difficult to provide for his family. This was not about luxuries, but about simple staples. The other *kollel* fellows were aware of this fellow's impoverished state, and they decided to help him by sharing their *maaser* money (tithe) with him. It did not solve all his economic challenges, but the extra infusion helped lighten the load on his shoulders.

He was holding his own, keeping his head above water (with the help of his friends). *Baruch Hashem*, his eldest daughter became engaged to a very fine young man. While the *simchah* was great, the awareness that he now needed to make a wedding and had other related expenses as well made him very anxious, to say the least. Once again, his friends stepped in to calm his nerves. They would raise money, so that he could marry off his daughter in a simple, but dignified, manner. He arranged a hall and a caterer and prepared the invitations. When his friends received the invitation to the wedding, they could not believe where the wedding was being held: at the nicest, most expensive hall in the city. They surmised that the caterer probably had a small annex which

he rents out on special occasions. When they arrived at the hall, they were shocked that the celebration was being held in the main ballroom -- a room usually set aside for the wealthiest members of the community. Their surprise turned to shock when they saw the flowers and centerpieces. They could not understand what had happened. Was it possible that their "poor" friend was really a man of means? One thought led to another, and the accusations became more pronounced, until they decided that they would no longer provide this fellow with a weekly stipend. If he could afford such a wedding, he could easily afford to provide for his family.

By now the reader must also be upset. How dare he accept their hard-earned money when he had the audacity to make a wedding to the envy of even the wealthy guests? When the *kollel* fellow saw that his stipend had ceased, he approached one of his friends and asked for an explanation. Had he done something wrong? The reply was most concise and blunt: "If you can afford such a wedding, you certainly do not warrant a stipend." The *kollel* fellow replied that he had an explanation, which he, regrettably, was unable to share with them. Understandably, this response did not sit well with them.

A few days passed, until one day the *kollel* fellow asked his friends to gather around, so that he could share with them the "other side" of the wedding story. He related, "In the beginning, when I first started searching for a wedding hall, I had entertained no thoughts concerning the hall that I used. It simply was beyond my financial grasp. After checking every hall in the city, however, and discovering that they were all booked, I changed my mind. I would go to the expensive hall and throw myself at their feet and beg. The owner listened and said I could use one of the smaller halls in the rear of the building and pay whatever I could afford. They shook hands, and, as the owner was about to enter the name of the *kallah's* family, he stopped and asked if I knew another man with a similar last name. 'Of course I knew him. He was my late father,' I responded. When the owner ascertained that the man concerning whom he was asking was, indeed, the paternal grandfather of the *kallah*, he declared, 'I owe my entire life to your father! He saved me from certain death during the Holocaust. I have been searching for years for him or any member of his family!'

"Please allow me, as some small token of gratitude to your father, to marry off his granddaughter in utmost style. I will provide her with a lavish affair at no cost to you. There is one stipulation, however. You may not divulge that I am covering all the expenses of the wedding. That will remain our secret.'

"We both kept our words and did not share our little secret. It was quite difficult. I saw the looks of disappointment on the faces of the guests. People were nice to my face, but I was certain that the topic of discussion in all circles was: 'How is he able to pay for such an elegant wedding?' When I realized how much the wedding would ultimately cost me (as a result of the lost stipend,) I asked the owner to absolve me of my promise. He did, and now you know the rest of the story."

Let us return to the wedding when people were questioning the *kollel* fellow's financial portfolio and

asserting his audacity in making such a fancy wedding. Did anyone give him the benefit of the doubt? Did anyone bother saying that he just was not the type of person to accept a weekly stipend provided by his friends, who were themselves struggling to make ends meet? Probably not, because human nature, coupled with the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, would rather have a field day finding fault. It is not only what people say that defines *lashon hora*, but what they think or do not think. Without *hisbonenus*, one leaves himself open to falling into the abyss of *lashon hora*.